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Religion and Politics in Kachin Conflict

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Abstract

The centrality of religion in the making of modern Kachin ethnic identity must be understood in the context of political crisis arising from the complex interplay of religion and politics. Kachin theologians understand and explain their people’s conflict through a biblical lens and the Kachin are likely to continue armed struggle until they enter the promised land in which justice and genuine peace embrace each other. This means that the Kachin Independence Army is unlikely to return to the politically unsettled peace that characterized the period prior to the 1994 ceasefire agreement with the Tatmadaw. More broadly, political instability, economic stagnation, ethnic insurgency, and humanitarian crises will continue to paralyze Burma unless the historically legitimate interests of the Kachin and other ethnic minority groups are respected and protected.

စာတမ်းအကျဉ်း

ကချင်လူမျိုးစု၏ လူမျိုးစုဖြစ်မှု သွင်ပြင်လက္ခဏာရပ်များကို နားလည်ရန်မှာ ဘာသာရေး (ခရစ်ယာန်ဘာသာ) ၏အခြေခံကျမှု သာမက ဘာသာရေးနှင့် နိုင်ငံရေးရောထွေးမှုမှ ဖြစ်ပေါ်လာသော နိုင်ငံရေးအကျပ်အတည်းကို ပါနားလည်ထားရမည် ဖြစ်သည်။ ကချင်ခရစ်ယာန် ဓမ္မပညာရှင်များသည်သူတို့လူမျိုး၏ ပဋိပက္ခကို သမ္မာကျမ်းစာအပေါ် အခြေခံသောအမြင်ဖြင့်ချဉ်းကပ်လေ့ ရှိကြပြီး၊ ကချင်လူမျိုးများသည် သမ္မာကျမ်းစာအလိုအရသူတို့ကို ဘုရားသခင် ကတိကဝတ်ပြုထားသော တရားမျှတမှုနှင့် စစ်မှန်သောငြိမ်းချမ်းရေး တည်ရှိရာ မြေကို မရရှိ

¹ Pseudonym.

မခြင်းဆက်လက်၍ လက်နက်ကို တိုက်ပွဲဝင်သွားဖွယ်ရှိ သည်ဟုသုံး သပ်လေ့ရှိသည်ကို တွေ့ရပါသည်။ ကချင်လွတ်မြောက်ရေး တပ်မတော် သည် ၁၉၉၄ ခုနှစ် မြန်မာ့တပ်မတော်နှင့် အပစ်အခတ်ရပ်စဲရေး စာချုပ်မတိုင်မီကာလ မတိုင်မီကရှိခဲ့သော နိုင်ငံရေးအရ တည်ငြိမ်မှုမရှိသော အခြေအနေ မျိုးသို့ ပြန်လှည့်သွားရန်မှာ ဖြစ်နိုင်ချေလွန်စွာနည်းပါသည်။ ကချင်နှင့် အခြားတိုင်းရင်းသား လူနည်းစုများ၏ သမိုင်းကြောင်း အရတရားဝင်ရ သင့်ရထိုက်သည့် အကျိုးစီးပွားများကို လေးစား ကာကွယ်မှု မပြုလုပ်ပါက မြန်မာနိုင်ငံ သည် နိုင်ငံရေး မတည်ငြိမ်မှု၊ စီးပွားရေးမတိုးတက်မှု၊ နှင့်လူမျိုးစု လက်နက် ကိုင်ပဋိပက္ခများ အောက်တွင် ချည့်နဲ့ကျဆင်းသွား မည် ဖြစ်ပါသည်။

Kachin History

The ethnic Kachin, much like other upland people in Burma, never learned how to read and write until the late nineteenth century, when Christian missionaries came to their country and invented a writing system for them. This is why they had no written history describing how they settled in what they now call Kachinland in the northern frontier of contemporary Burma. Kachin oral history, according to which the ethnic Chin and Kachin were blood brothers, suggests that they possibly came from the Tibetan plateau that they call *Major Shingra Bum*. In his extensively cited work on the Kachin, Herman G. Tegenfeldt, who lived in Kachinland for decades, states that the term ‘Kachin’ covers six sub-dialectic groups: Jinghpaw, Rawang, Maru, Lashi, Atsi, and Lisu.² While precisely portraying Kachin social structures, Maran La Raw, a Kachin scholar, contends that despite their linguistic differences, the Kachin “share notions of common ancestry, practice the same form of marriage system,

² Tegenfeldt, 1974, pp. 17-28.

have an almost homogenous customary law and social-control system, use only Jinghpaw for ritual purposes, and are largely polyglots, in the full sense of the term”³

Historically, the political leaders who mapped and determined the collective fate and destiny of the Kachin as a single people—before the British occupation of their ancient homeland—were not monarchs, but chiefs (*Duwas*) who effectually defended their country and sovereignty from any external adversaries. This is evidence that the Kachin never lost their independence and country to any one of their neighbors.⁴ Despite the historical record of a certain degree of sociopolitical encounter and interaction between the Kachin and their larger neighbors, they were widely known to have effectively protected their ancestral domain and independence against any form of interference from any outside powers, therefore implying that the lowland Burman was not ever able to exert political power over Kachin country.⁵ When aptly describing this historical episode, Tegenfeldt asserts that the Kachin “refuses to bend the neck to Burmese, Chinese, or Shans”.⁶

The reasoning behind deploring and accusing British colonialists and American missionaries as being historically responsible for the bitter ethnic division between the Kachin and Burman is false. Kachin country was historically not ever part of ‘Burma’, and the Kachin never called Burma their home before 1948 when they, along with the Chin and Shan peoples, willingly became the new citizens of the state of Burma as a historical consequence of the Panglong Agreement in 1947. Maran La Raw’s work underscores the necessity of looking at various components of Burmese political history from a variety of angles, rather than just blaming British colonialism alone for all the problems related to ethnic minorities; he also closely examines the intricacy of ethnic conflict in modern Burma. He sharply

³ Maran La Raw, 1967, p. 133.

⁴ Woodman (1962, p. 277) and Tucker (2001, p. 20).

⁵ Maran La Raw, 1967, p. 140.

⁶ Tegenfeldt, 1974, p. 432.

criticizes some Burma scholars who believe that all responsibility for ethnic division between the Burman and ethnic minority groups should be placed on the British. For example, Maran La Raw upbraids Kyaw Thet for condemning the British for maintaining the status quo and not taking concerted steps to politically and culturally integrate the Kachin into mainstream Burman civilization:

When the British were annexing Upper Burma, the Kachin had already risen en masse against the Burmese king. It took the British more than ten years after the fall of the Mandalay Empire to subdue the tribesmen, and the Kachin did not finally give up resistance against the British until 1935. It, therefore, becomes absurd to insist that the British colonial government should have begun immediate steps to assimilate the Kachin tribes in these circumstances.⁷

That the Kachin had direct social interactions with other ethnic groups such as the Chinese, Burman, and Shan while increasingly exposing themselves to the broader world could lead us to expect a marked influence of these groups over Kachin society. However, historical evidence reveals the hostile relations between this ethnic group and their neighbors, especially the lowland Burmans. In underlining the importance of grasping a long history of awkward interactions between the two groups, Tegenfeldt writes in his work that what historically defined the dealings between them was aggression, citing the brutal fighting between the two groups in 1877 and the sack of Bhamo by the Kachin and Chinese in 1884.⁸ These historical facts seem to explain why the king of Burma reportedly told William H. Roberts: “So you are to teach the Kachins! Do you see my dogs over there? I tell you, it will be earlier to convert and teach these dogs. You are wasting your life.”⁹

⁷ Maran La Raw, 1967, p. 129.

⁸ Tegenfeldt, 1974, p. 98, 107.

⁹ Reverend Zaw Aung, personal communication, September, 2018.

The twists and turns of Burman and Kachin historical experiences during World War II appear to have polarized them even further. For example: whereas Kachin fighters consistently provided the British and Americans with critically important intelligence and military assistance, Burman fighters—under the magnetic leadership of Aung San—fervently backed the Japanese in driving the British from Burma and subsequently occupying it, a difference that sheds considerable light on the fallacious nature of the narrative of ethnic unity between the two groups in the fight for independence in the 1940s. It must also be noted here that Kachin guerillas played a militarily important role in containing and beating the Japanese endeavoring to seize British India: Burma scholars like Donovan Webster pertinently maintained that when Kachin soldiers stupefied the Japanese, “the first true guerrilla fighting of World War II emerged”.¹⁰ The Kachin only reluctantly fought alongside their Burman counterparts in ousting the Japanese from Burma after March 27, 1945, when Aung San ordered his men to turn against their former ally.¹¹

The hard reality of the rapidly shifting political situation in Burma after the end of the war seemingly required the Kachin to wonder how to chart and shape their collective fate and future destiny as a single independent people, and their leaders voluntarily joined the Burmans in founding the modern state of Burma in 1948 after they extensively deliberated and unanimously agreed to the basic terms of the historic Panglong Agreement in 1947.¹² The symbolic and political magnitude of this agreement should be considered and understood in the politically turbulent context of the first years of national independence. As some of the original co-founders of the new state, they steadfastly maintained their political allegiance to Burma and unequivocally made a significant military contribution to protecting their shared new country. This came to a head when the

¹⁰ Webster, 2004, p. 50.

¹¹ Lintner, 2011, p. 29.

¹² Kachin Research Group, n.d., p. 3.

rapid escalation of political violence and armed insurgency effectively paralyzed and confined the central government in Rangoon, consequently proving that when the new state was in real danger of disintegration, the Kachin played a decisive part in averting it.¹³

Instead of enhancing and buttressing Kachin political loyalty to Burma, U Nu took measured steps to ostracize and undermine the Kachin in the years that followed, which inevitably left them feeling intensely betrayed. U Nu failed to respect the terms and conditions of the landmark agreement between Kachin leaders and Aung San, while also neglecting the northern frontier of the country. He exacerbated these factors by bringing religion into national politics. Held together, U Nu's actions not only explicitly undercut the political support of the Kachin for the country, but also sidelined and radicalized Kachin young nationalists to stage an armed insurgency against the state. In 1961 the tyranny of his racial arrogance, cultural callousness, religious fanaticism, and political absurdity finally triggered a political tsunami of anti-Burmanization in northern Burma. Zaw Aung, citing the rise of the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), told me that their undisputed political loyalty to Burma was severely tested and finally ended when U Nu crossed the red line by making Buddhism the state religion. It is, however, remarkable that while U Nu and his administration blatantly promoted Buddhism from 1950 on,¹⁴ Kachin leaders seem not to have objected until 1960 – even more remarkable considering the secular nature of the state and the historical gravity of Christianity in Kachin society.

When members of an inquiry commission were sent by the U Nu administration to Myitkyina to seek Kachin public opinion, they understandably faced what U Nu himself called “a rough reception by the Kachin Christians”.¹⁵ In describing this sour episode in Kachin memory, Zaw Aung vividly said, “I was old enough to remember that day. My father joined thousands of

¹³ Htin Aung (1967, p. 317) and U Nu (1975, p. 194).

¹⁴ Steinberg, 2006, p. 62.

¹⁵ U Nu, 1974, p. 204.

our people, including students, furiously protesting and blocking the train bringing members of that commission. That incident was especially deep, intense, and emotional".¹⁶ We must recall that historically the two primary factors for the formation of the KIA on 5 February 1961 were the handing over of three Kachin villages to China and the making of Buddhism the state religion.¹⁷ Balawng Du, a Baptist pastor, was the father of three Kachin nationalists, Lahtaw Zau Seng, Zau Tu, and Zau Dan, who are credited with the formation of the KIA, and their father was widely thought to have had a significant influence on them when they started the Kachin armed insurgency against the state; this perhaps reflects at least partially the interaction between religion and politics. It should be underscored that Christianity began gaining political importance in the late 1940s in the long course of fostering pan-Kachin ethnonationalism.

The inevitable impression is that this extreme and dangerous step U Nu took ignored Kachin interests and explicitly supported the racially chauvinistic policy of Burmanization, essentially leading to the crumbling of the pillars upon which national unity in Burma stood. It is, hence, safe to say that U Nu left the Kachin with practically no choice but to end their political allegiance to the state of Burma; however, it cannot be said that the KIA has been necessarily fighting only in the name of religion. Although Christians never constituted more than 40 percent of the entire Kachin population in Burma by 1960, they seem to have played an outsized role in the collective life of their people, especially considering that the young nationalists and intellectuals who shaped and impacted Kachin history and society after 1948 were mostly, if not exclusively, Christians.¹⁸ In sum, the centrality of religion in the making of modern Kachin ethnic identity must be understood in the historical context of political crisis arising from this complex interplay between religion and politics. In the analysis that follows, let us examine the prominent role of religion in nurturing and advancing Kachin life.

¹⁶ Reverend Zaw Aung, personal communication, September, 2018.

¹⁷ Linter, 1994, p. 164.

¹⁸ Sadan, 2014, p. 286.

Kachin Christianity

Kachin scholars digging into and scrutinizing Kachin religious history universally agree that there was no historical indication that their ancestors ever adopted any established religions like Buddhism, Islam, and Hinduism, but continually practiced Kachin cosmic religion before 1877. After 1877, American missionaries initiated evangelization activities in Kachin country. Prior to this, the Kachin tended not to convert to Buddhism, and the perceived influence of the ethnic Burmans in lowland Burma on religion in Kachin society was insignificant.¹⁹ In 1877, the first American and Karen missionaries arrived in Kachin country and started the labor of evangelizing them as a direct outcome of special appeals from Josiah N. Cushing, a missionary in Burma, to the American Baptist Missionary Union (ABMU). In a positive response to his passionate appeal, the ABMU sent Albert J. Lyon, a native of Minnesota, to Burma in 1877, but he worked among the Kachin in Bhamo for less than two months as his life was cut short.²⁰

Then, the ABMU replaced him with William H. Roberts, a native of Virginia, who arrived in Bhamo in 1879 and baptized seven Kachin on March 19, 1882, thereby marking the beginning of Kachin Christianity. Though Christians represented just a tiny minority of the entire Kachin population, Roberts acted as their holistic patron and was possibly aware of the importance of having a single religious body for all Kachin Christians for the purpose of promoting social advancement, national awakening, and Kachin unity. Thus, he conceived of forming the Kachin Baptist organization as early as 1884. Church meetings and conferences ostensibly provided an essential space for nurturing the notion of oneness and unity among Kachin Christians as they came to recognize and embrace each other as brethren, boosting political and national consciousness among different linguistic

¹⁹ La Seng Dingrin, 2013, p. 113; N'ngai Gam, 2004, p. 77.

²⁰ Tegenfeldt, 1974, p. 97.

groups of the Kachin and finally leading to the formation of the Kachin Baptist Association (KBA) in 1910.²¹

The emergence of the KBA was historically remarkable. For the first time in their history, the Kachin had a single religious organization representing all Kachin Christians, slowly but steadily embodying their ethnic identity, increasingly animating the soul of Kachin nationalism, and markedly unifying Kachin inside and outside their ancestral homeland just as they entered the wider modern world at the turn of the twentieth century. It should be stressed here that the man who fundamentally transformed Kachin history forever was Ola Hanson, a Swedish-American missionary, whose enormous knowledge of Swedish, English, German, Greek, and Hebrew led him to Bhamo in 1890, where he conducted linguistic and literary work for the Kachin. Living with the Kachin for nearly four decades, he indisputably made a fantastic contribution, considering that he was singularly credited with formulating Kachin orthography using the Roman alphabet in place of Burmese, creating a grammar of Kachin, a Kachin-English dictionary, and translating the entire Bible into Kachin (in addition to many other religious books).²² Another noted missionary who joined him in 1892 and worked with and for the Kachin was the German-American George J. Geis.

While the key roles that Roberts, Hanson, and Geis played in the shared life of the Kachin in the early years of the evangelization enterprise in Kachin country were astonishing, the first missionary who had direct contact with the Kachin was Eugenio Kincaid, who arrived in Burma in 1830. Kincaid worked in Ava from 1833 to 1837 as a missionary and went as far as to Bhamo in 1837 where he saw upland Kachin people. He was supposedly impressed by what he witnessed and optimistically recorded in his journal that they would almost surely convert to Christianity without much difficulty, if and when evangelized, primarily due to some essential theological similarities between their religion and Christianity. Then, he was forced by political turbulence in Upper Burma to leave for lower Burma in July of 1837 and never

²¹ Tegenfeldt, 1974, p. 128.

²² Tegenfeldt, 1974, p. 118.

came back to Kachin country, let alone converting any Kachin.²³ He lived long enough to see his dream realized, though, as his fellow missionaries started mission work among them after 1877.

With other missionaries arriving and working among the Kachin in the years that followed, nearly all Kachin adopted Christianity as their new religion within a century. What Kincaid predicted over a century ago became historical reality. Christianity has not just animated and nourished the soul of the Kachin, but also has become intertwined with their ethnic identity, consequently attesting to the indispensability of Christianity in the collective life of the Kachin as a single people with a distinct ethnicity, religion, literature, and history.

Just why they converted en masse to Christianity has fascinated scholars perusing the complicated interplay between religion and politics in contemporary Burma. When carefully analyzing some possible reasons for the choice of religious conversion among their ancestors, Kachin scholars generally observe that, though a fusion of education, literature, economic life, Kachin religion indeed played a primary role, and the political setting and social change set the broad circumstances for religious conversion to Christianity.²⁴

Karen and American missionaries continued undertaking the pastoral roles of the Kachin church until 1901 when the first Kachin pastors were ordained, but as the number of Christians steadily increased, church leaders keenly wanted to establish a local Kachin seminary for the future of Kachin Christianity. With the solid backing of its member churches, the KBA thus sent Lahpai Zau Tu together with two others as its representatives to attend the general conference of the Burma Baptist Convention (BBC), which took place in October of 1930. Kachin representatives initially faced difficulty in convincing BBC leaders of what they needed, but insisted on being given official consent to start a seminary in Kachin country. Zau Tu was so adamant that the

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 82-83.

²⁴ K. Zau Nan, 2009, p. 172; La Seng Dingrin, 1972, p. 112; N-Gan Tang Gun, 2009, p. 45.

BBC finally relented its earlier opposition and allowed the KBA to establish a separate seminary for Kachin students, and the KBA consequently founded the Kachin Theological College and Seminary (KTCS) in Myitkyina in 1932.²⁵

As the number of church members swelled over the years and church leaders acutely recognized the pressing need to work together for the enduring vitality of Kachin Christianity, the Baptist associations under the KBA assembled in 1954 and formed the Kachin Baptist Convention (KBC). Foreign missionaries simultaneously selected seven new leaders for special theological training for the future of the KBC, as they fully knew that they could be expelled from Burma at any time. The KBC has been a pillar of Kachin society ever since.²⁶ As we will see in what follows, religious institutions have been so indispensable to the collective life of the Kachin that Burman politicians often ended up meeting with KBC leaders for help whenever they pushed for peace talks with the KIA. Brang Shawng, a Kachin student, explained to me during our conversation in Lashio that the KIA and KBC are essentially two sides of the same coin, adding that the KIA will almost certainly not sign any agreement with the Tatmadaw (armed forces of Myanmar) unless the KBC supports it. His analysis appears to explain why ex-leaders Thein Sein and Aung San Suu Kyi each met with Reverend Hkhalam Samson twice.

When examining what role Kachin Christianity seems to have played in the political history of the Kachin at the dawn of Burmese independence in the late 1940s, Maran La Raw makes an observation that perhaps seems odd. When faced with the soul-searching question of whether the historically independent Kachin should join the future state of Burma, the Christian Kachin who once trained at mission schools in Bhamo supported the idea: “when in 1947 Kachin witnesses gave their approval for a state of some sort within the independent Union of Burma, all but one of the witnesses were products of the Bhamo missionary

²⁵ N-Gan Tang Gun, 2009, p. 48.

²⁶ Reverend Zaw Aung, personal communication, September, 2018.

schools. These were the people who decided that the fate of the Kachin should be with the rest of Burma”.²⁷

With the veiled support of the Chinese authorities, the Burman leaders of the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) invited KIA leaders to China. They ostensibly promised them all the firearms they needed if they accepted the leadership of the CPB, implying that the communists placed pressure on them to cut off any historical and religious ties with the West, particularly the United States. Their arrogant hosts also allegedly told them that if they refused what was offered, for whatever reason, they would receive nothing and be considered nothing but “running dogs of American capitalists and bourgeois minded”.²⁸ The communists entirely failed in seducing the Kachin soul to break off all bonds of connections between the Kachin and the United States, for KIA leaders made it crystal clear to the CPB that they would not be lectured on their future and that they would not succumb to anyone. When asked why they refused to submit to CPB leadership, Zaw Aung explained to me in no uncertain terms that KIA leaders rejected them, essentially because the Kachin were Christians. He went on to tell me that when Naw Seng, a Kachin himself, came back to Burma with the CPB, the Kachin public similarly rebuffed him for the same reason.²⁹

Even when KIA leaders made a strategic alliance with the CPB after 1976, Christianity continued to play an essential role in the collective life of the KIA, according to renowned Burma expert Bertil Linter.³⁰ This historical experience seems to resonate with the observation of a Kachin student I met in Mandalay. In characterizing how their newly adopted religion changed their collective existence as a single person, they said on condition of anonymity that Christianity “has been the historical

²⁷ Maran La Raw, 1967, p. 141.

²⁸ Tucker, 2001, p. 90.

²⁹ Reverend Zaw Aung, personal communication, September, 2018.

³⁰ Lintner, 1994, p. 234.

source of Kachin advancement, and there cannot be the Kachin without Christianity”.³¹

The New Kachin War

When the controversial 2008 constitution officially became ratified, it mandated that all ‘ceasefire groups’—that is, non-state armed groups who signed ceasefire agreements with the government— must become Border Guard Forces (BGFs). Kachin leaders immediately held open consultations with the public, and reportedly 99 percent of the Kachin public solidly agreed after serious deliberations that the KIA must refuse to accept the enforced government policy of the BGF. The KIA consequentially rejected both the BGF plan and the 2008 constitution, and the Tatmadaw swiftly responded by undertaking a series of rapid preparations for the renewal of armed conflict in Kachin areas. The KIA, in return, started recruiting, training, and arming a new generation of guerilla fighters, in addition to mobilizing its veterans for the imminent battles with the Tatmadaw. The brutal warfare that continues to devastate the northern frontier of Burma finally started in 2011 when the Tatmadaw attacked KIA soldiers.³²

Why did the Tatmadaw impose ruthless war on the Kachin while the government in Naypyidaw called for peace talks with all other ethnic armed groups in the country? It is entirely possible that the string of successes by the former military regime in undermining the KIA militarily and politically between 1994 and 2011 led to a feeling by Thein Sein that the Tatmadaw could do practically whatever it pleases in Kachinland. It seems that before they declared a new war on the KIA, the Tatmadaw did not fully grasp the attitude shift in Kachin society that came with the consequences of the ceasefire. There has been a profound convergence between why the Kachin universally urged

³¹ Kachin student from Myitkyina, personal communication, September, 2018.

³² Reverend Hkalam Samson, personal communication, October, 2018.

the KIA to refuse the BGF policy, and how the Kachin concurrently perceived the stunning costs of the ceasefire agreement—which did not even address the root causes of the political problem. Respected and popular Kachin academic and author K. Zau Nan cogently contends in an article in *Theologies and Cultures* that the Burma Army, alongside Chinese companies and some KIA elites, outrageously used the ceasefire as a means to plunder the wealth of Kachinland in the name of sham development. He concludes that the only outcome “for the local people was the loss of their privileges and the natural environment, followed by various kinds of social problems”.³³

All of the Kachin interviewed for this paper mentioned that they have been deprived of natural resources from teak to jade and gold and treated almost as aliens in the very homeland of their ancestors. In their view, this is a direct result of what many of them poignantly call the “curse of the ceasefire”. Many Kachin also accused the Tatmadaw of deliberately instigating a racially-targeted drug war against them by destroying the collective life of Kachin young men as part of the ethnic cleansing policy in upland Burma. They claim that government agents brought and distributed drugs in Kachin communities without any legal restrictions. Indeed, everyone who has happened to visit Kachinland after 2000 hardly, if ever, fails to notice the dangerous level of drug use in Kachin society and its sociopolitical consequences. A Kachin student from Myitkyina speaking on condition of anonymity claims drugs are not only available but also practically legal everywhere in Kachin areas. In contrast, government agents usually prohibited young Burman men from accessing drugs, adding that the number of Kachin young men who died of drugs hugely outnumbered KIA fighters killed in battle. Stressing how drugs had already devastated Kachin communities and threatened the very existence of the Kachin as a people, Brang Shawng asserts that roughly 80 percent of Kachin young men became addicted to various kinds of drugs before

³³ K. Zau Nan, 2013, p. 91.

2011.³⁴ Likewise, Hkalam Samson openly accuses Burman military rulers and some KIA elites of corruption when reflecting upon the dynamic effects of the ceasefire on the collective life of the Kachin. He calls this period “the tragic phase of degeneration for the entire Kachin population socially, economically, and ethnically”.³⁵

Kachin theologians also pointedly accuse the military regime of perpetrating and perpetuating deliberate and systematic steps to Burmanize their homeland, citing the immense number of pagodas across Kachinland. They charge that the Burman-controlled government continuously protects and promotes the Burman race, religion, and literature while methodically curbing and erasing Kachin history, culture, and literature.³⁶ By erecting pagodas on nearly every mountaintop in Kachin regions against the backdrop of local opposition, the government does not merely disregard the interests of the Kachin, but also bolsters the presence of the Tatmadaw; the government has been persistent in effecting the longstanding policy of Burmanizing ethnic areas such as Kachinland. Another impact that allegedly came along with the ceasefire was a demographic shift, caused by hundreds of thousands of lowland Burmans reportedly resettling in Kachinland after 1995; and some were said to have become spies for the Tatmadaw after the renewal of the conflict in 2011.

While the Tatmadaw effectively controlled significant urban centers like Myitkyina, Bhamo, and Kutkai, the KIA presumably wielded almost unchallenged military muscle over Kachin areas before 1994. This situation epitomized the undisputed restriction of the so-called national armed forces and the military power of Kachin insurgency. The KIA nevertheless found itself forced to increasingly abandon many of its militarily and strategically important posts after 1995, as the Burman generals disgracefully but successfully carried out the policy of undermining the might of the KIA politically and militarily by penetrating

³⁴ Brang Shawng, personal communication, November, 2018.

³⁵ Reverend Hkalam Samson, personal communication, October, 2018.

³⁶ Layang Seng Ja, 2017, p. 205.

previously unknown terrain and militarizing Kachinland. Benedict Rogers stresses the extreme and dangerous level of Tatmadaw militarization in Kachin areas during the ceasefire: “since the regime broke the ceasefire, the number of Tatmadaw battalions in Kachin and the northern Shan States has risen to at least 150, a dramatic increase in an already heavily militarized area”.³⁷

Most Kachin concur that the KIA seemed unprepared, at best, for the possible repercussions for the Kachin public—socially, economically, and politically—when the KIA finally signed the ceasefire deal with the military regime: the reader will remember that most Kachin now call this bundle of consequences the ‘ceasefire curse’. It must indeed be pointed out that some Kachin politicians doubted the honesty of Than Shwe and his generals as early as the late 1990s, considering the formation of the Kachin National Organization (KNO) in January of 1999. In casting some light on why many veteran Kachin politicians seriously questioned the wisdom of that ceasefire and eventually founded the KNO, Duwa Mahkaw Hkun Sa wrote, “the KNO was formed by a highly respected group of people with long experience in Kachin politics, who had a clear sense that the Kachin movement was being manipulated by a Burmese regime that had no intention of keeping its promises for justice and equality”.³⁸

The prospect of durable peace in the northern frontier of Burma remains elusive despite numerous meetings and conferences between Naypitaw and Laiza. In a public message to the Kachin population, Lanyaw Zawng Hra, former Chairman of the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), for instance, urged all Kachin fighters and civilians to remain firmly united in defending their ancestral homeland. He emphasized the innate right to exist as a distinct single people against what he called the genocidal policy of the state to wipe out the ethnic Kachin from the face of Burma. By stressing the historical necessity of their armed struggle while eulogizing the astonishing level of public support for the KIA, he seemed to enchant a new generation of

³⁷ Rogers, 2012, p. 94.

³⁸ Mahkaw Hkun Sa, 2016, p. 334.

Kachin nationalists to continue their ongoing revolution. In an indirect reaction to Aung San Suu Kyi continually urging ethnic nationalists to stop dwelling on the past, he continued, “taking the wrong step in politics in the past has cost us 70 years of hardships; therefore, we must carefully wade through the current political waters. Although people are generally encouraged to leave the past behind and move forward, this is not something we must easily forget”.³⁹

The ravages, costs and effects of the war in northern Burma on Kachin people could persist for generations after the cruel fighting between the KIA and Tatmadaw finally ends. Analyzing the full consequences of the outrageous conflict, K. Zau Nan contends that the Kachin “have experienced bloodshed, violence, torture, rape, murder, burning villages, and fleeing from homes to refugee camps”.⁴⁰ M. La Rip, a respected Kachin intellectual and Myanmar Institute of Theology (MIT) scholar, presented a paper at the third conference of contextual theology at the MIT in January of 2018. As a scholar steeped in Old Testament Studies and as a Kachin religious leader with in-depth knowledge about Kachin political history and extensive connections to his suffering people, his words carried weight and sentiment not just for Kachin students but also for other MIT students from numerous ethnic groups. The impact was obvious when he directly accused the Tatmadaw of using rape as a weapon of war in his native land systemically and deliberately. When stressing how rape survivors coped with the rest of their devastated lives, he continued to say that many sadly committed suicide while others died from unsafe abortions.⁴¹

In Lashio, October 2018, I spent several days with many Kachin—both pastors and laypeople—from Kachin State and northern Shan State, exploring and understanding the depth of armed conflict in Kachin society. An elderly Kachin pastor from Myitkyina was fighting back the tears as he told me, “I recently went to Laiza and saw the ruins of numerous churches all down

³⁹ Tsa Doi La, 2017.

⁴⁰ K. Zau Nan, 2016, p. 98.

⁴¹ M. La Rip, 2018.

the line. There were over four hundred churches under the KBC, but over 60 of them became ruined”.⁴² The large scale of this violence intensified the determination of the Kachin to continue their political struggle, given that the level of public support for the KIA has been historically unparalleled and the difference between KIA fighters and Kachin civilians sometimes becomes blurred. For many Kachin, the ongoing war between the KIA and Tatmadaw has been essentially a public war of resistance for survival. In deftly depicting how a representative culture of public debate and consensus in Kachin society enhanced the vigor of their political struggle, Hkun Sa asserts:

We have traditionally practiced a form of debate in our communities that is highly inclusive. Important decisions are typically made with a relatively high degree of public consultation; this has undoubtedly enabled us to move forward collectively, despite disagreements, with greater consensus than in some other communities, and this has been a reason for the strength of our struggle.⁴³

My impression, after a series of extensive conversations with many Kachin, is that the Kachin public backing the KIA shall continue their unfinished revolution to defend their ancestral homeland and their innate right to exist as a single people against the evil being embodied by Burmanization. Hkhalam Samson explicitly told me during our conversation that the problem of ethnic conflict and armed insurgency will continue to paralyze the country as long as the Tatmadaw protects the 2008 constitution, thus implicitly implying that the Kachin shall never surrender their armed revolution unless and until their interests are well respected and protected constitutionally. In this particular respect, Martin Smith correctly argues, “the ceasefire breakdown rapidly became a defining event in modern

⁴² Kachin Baptist pastor in Lashio, personal communication, October, 2018.

⁴³ Mahkaw Khun Sa, 2016, p. 332.

Kachin history, furthering the determination of a younger generation of leaders to continue their struggle, however difficult, until a real political solution could be reached”.⁴⁴

Kachin Public Theology

I explore in what follows how Kachin religious leaders perceive political violence shattering Kachin society, and how their outlooks and actions effectively impact and shape the nature of this protracted conflict. We cannot fully understand the depth of this political crisis without understanding the major roles religious leaders play and the enormous moral authority they wield in Kachin society. All Burman military rulers deliberately and systematically imposed restrictions on Kachin literature, culture, and language as part of the state policy of undermining (and eventually destroying) the presence of cultural and ethnic diversity by Burmanizing the Kachin and their native land. In direct reaction to what many church leaders increasingly refer to as an existential threat from the Burmans to the historical existence of the Kachin as a single people with distinct ethnicity and culture, the KBC has been running what the Kachin fondly call *myu shalat jawng* (Kachin national schools) aimed at protecting and promoting their distinctive ethnic identity against Burmanization. A Kachin pastor asking for anonymity recently told me that the core subjects at *myu shalat jawng* include the Bible, English, Kachin history, language, and literature, because the successive governments chronically deprived Kachin students of the chance to learn their mother tongue and history at public schools in the homeland of their ancestors.⁴⁵

The aforementioned KTCS has been one of the most popular destinations for the most talented young men and women from Kachin communities across Burma, impacting and vitalizing Kachin history and politics alike. By offering more subject courses like Kachin history, Kachin politics, Kachin literature, English,

⁴⁴ Smith, 2016, p. 90.

⁴⁵ The military regime, indeed, placed many restrictions on all ethnic and religious minority groups in Burma.

and western literature apart from the usual regular theological courses while recruiting, teaching, and preparing young leaders for new generations of their people, KTCS scholars have played a pivotal role in fostering the deep sense of Kachin ethnonationalism against the background of the Burmanization process across the northern frontier of Burma. In underscoring the symbolic and political importance of the KTCS in modern Kachin history, Zaw Aung told me that the KTCS “has been historically indispensable to protecting and promoting Kachin ethnicity, religion, literature, and language. It has been the heart and soul of the Kachin collectively”.⁴⁶ I have no reason to doubt that the KTCS has been a fertile hotbed of Kachin nationalism and a breeding ground for Kachin resistance.

Moreover, many Kachin church leaders suspected the military government of intentionally allowing unrestricted access to drugs in Kachinland as part of a covert policy of demoralizing and killing young Kachin men in realizing the apparent final goal of what Sang Raw and many Kachin call “slow genocide”. I was told while in Lashio that drug abuse has been part of life for young men in that part of Burma, mostly because the Tatmadaw has allowed militias and BGFs to grow and distribute drugs freely.⁴⁷ Samson told me in this particular respect that the level of the growing drug problem has been so severe for the collective existence of the Kachin that virtually all Kachin churches under his leadership finally initiated what has become known in Kachin as Pat Ja San (PJS). PJS members have been energetically involved in the mission of destroying opium fields and reducing the drug problem in direct reaction to what they usually call the “existential threat” of drugs.⁴⁸ When carrying out their drug eradication operations, PJS members often found themselves being challenged and confronted by Burma Army-backed militias and the BGF, which perhaps explains why Kachin leaders in

⁴⁶ Reverend Zaw Aung, personal communication, September, 2018.

⁴⁷ Kachin church leaders from Lashio, Kutkai, and Myitkyina, personal communications, October, 2018.

⁴⁸ Reverend Hkalam Samson, personal communication, October, 2018.

general and Kachin pastors, in particular, have accused the Tatmadaw of waging a drug war on Kachin young men.

Likening the history of Kachin political struggle for the full realization of self-determination, equal rights, and freedom for Kachin people to the biblical story of the sociopolitical emancipation of Jews from their long enslavement in Egypt, Kachin theologians have reasoned and justified the cause of their political revolution. Kachin scholars such as Layang Seng Ja, K. Zau Nan, Lahpai Fanang Lum, and Hting Nan Zau, called upon Kachin churches to resist the forces of social injustice, religious persecution, and ethnic cleansing being perpetrated and perpetuated by Tatmadaw against the Kachin population, articulating that resistance to the evil of political oppression and social injustice has been the sacred duty of all Christians biblically, morally, and historically.⁴⁹ Echoing what these theologians stood for, Zaw Aung told me: “we, the Kachin, are by nature fond of independence and nourished by the profound notion of freedom and equality in the Bible, so much so that we always resisted and will continue to do so any form of intrusions”.

The centrality of Christianity in the public life of the Kachin perhaps left Tatmadaw generals and government politicians—including Min Aung Hlaing, Thein Sein, and Aung San Suu Kyi—with the impression that the KBC is indispensable in the making of peace talks with the KIA. In our recent phone conversation from Myitkyina, Hkalam Samson recalled, “They urged me to help negotiate with the KIA for the possibility of reaching a truce accord between the two parties, for they consistently reasoned that the KBC has decisive moral authority over the KIA as most KIA fighters are indeed KBC members. I, however, told them that the KBC has a long-existing church policy of mass meeting for any important decisions and the Kachin public refused to return to the unstable peace of the past. I am, then, called a hard-liner.”⁵⁰ As to a series of high-profile meetings he held with top leaders of the state of Burma in the past, particularly Aung San

⁴⁹ Hting Nan Zau, 2018, p. 119; K. Zau Nan, 2016, p. 137; Lahpai Fanang Lum, 2018, pp. 51-52; Layang Seng Ya, 2017, p. 205.

⁵⁰ Reverend Hkalam Samson, personal communication, October, 2018.

Suu Kyi and Thein Sein, he continues to say that both the central government and Tatmadaw generals held the view that the KIA and KBC have increasingly become intertwined.

Though the historically complicated role of China in the Kachin conflict is not the central focus of this paper, I feel the urge to discuss this issue briefly here, as it is closely associated with the existence of strong religious ties between the Christian Kachin and the predominately Christian United States. It has been an open secret all along that the Chinese authorities repeatedly asked the KIA leaders to end ties with the United States in return for weapons by reasoning and articulating that China and Kachinland are geographically destined to be eternal neighbors. Kachin leaders, and especially KBC leaders, apparently refuse to succumb to that pressure, as they continue deepening their religious ties with their American counterparts, thus perhaps rebutting the mainstream accusations that China has controlled the KIA. During his recent visit to the United States, Hkalam Samson, for instance, met with some church leaders with strong ties to crucial American senators. Yun Sun is, therefore, right when she argues that the Chinese never fully trusted the Kachin, with their deep historical ties with the United States.⁵¹ China was, after all, not pleased with the public statement of opposition from the KBC to the Chinese Myitsone Dam project, according to Hkalam Samson.

In all, the Kachin shall likely continue their armed struggle, not because of, but despite all difficulties, until they enter the promised land in which justice and genuine peace embrace each other. The KIA shall not ever return to the politically unsettled peace similar to that of the ceasefire agreement in 1994. It must be stressed here that political instability, economic stagnation, ethnic insurgency, and humanitarian crisis will most likely continue to paralyze Burma unless the historically legitimate interests of the Kachin and other ethnic minority groups are respected and protected.

⁵¹ Sun, 2012, pp. 76-78.

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